THE

# RECONSTRUCTIONIST

DEDICATED TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF JUDAISM AS A RELIGIOUS CIVILIZATION, TO THE UPBUILDING OF ISRAEL'S ANCIENT HOMELAND, AND TO THE FURTHERANCE OF UNIVERSAL FREEDOM, JUSTICE AND PEACE.

Vol. III. April 30, 1937 Iyar 19, 5697 No. 6.

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# RECONSTRUCTIONIST

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## EDITORIALS

### The Jewish Welfare Board—Twenty Years Old

THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST extends its heartiest congratulations to the Jewish Welfare Board, which celebrates its twentieth anniversary on Sunday, April 25, in New York City. The celebration will take the form of an all-day conference to discuss the present status of the Center movement, and will culminate in a dinner in the evening. In sending greetings to the Jewish Welfare Board, the editors are performing no perfunctory task motivated by a sheer sense of duty or politeness. The work which the Jewish Welfare Board has been doing for the past two decades must evoke the admiration of all who are sincerely devoted to the reconstruction of Jewish life in this country.

For the most important work which the Welfare Board has been doing consists in the organization and guidance of more than 300 Y.M.H.A.'s, Y.W.H.A.'s and Community Centers throughout the country. By adopting the philosophy of the Jewish Center and adapting it to the needs of contemporaneous Jewish life, the Welfare Board has constituted itself one of the most constructive forces of our generation. Before the establishment of the Jewish Welfare Board, young Jews had no opportunity to express themselves as Jews in a satisfying environment and in a creative manner. The transplanted European synagogue catered only to the needs of the immigrants who, out of nostalgia and habit, could tolerate no serious modification in their Jewish way of life. This type of synagogue made no provision whatever for the needs of the youth. They provided no meeting place for social intercourse, and no activities adapted to the new American environment.

The only place where young American Jews could go was the settlement house established by the generation of Jews who preceded them to America. That generation was interested in the Americanization of the new immigrants, and for them Americanization represented assimilationism. By 1917, it had become sufficiently clear that the process of Americanization had overreached itself and that these institutions had not only outlived their usefulness but had become a menace to Jewish life. Their basic organization was sound insofar as they catered to the community at large, and derived support from a large mass. But their philosophy had led them to a dead end.

Two decades ago, therefore, the procedure was reversed, and the Community Center began to act as a force for positive

Jewish living on a community basis. The rapid growth of the Jewish Community Center, with an affirmative attitude towards Jewish life, testifies to the validity of the new approach and to the fact that it is answering a legitimate need in our generation.

There is every reason, therefore, for the Jewish Welfare Board to feel gratified by the work that it has done. We should like, however, to remind it of what many of its thoughtful and intelligent leaders already realize, namely, that a great many problems have yet to be solved and that the same kind of vigorous initiative which went into the establishment of hundreds of buildings should now be directed toward the clarification of the philosophy which is to be carried out in these institutions. Such problems as the attitude of the Center towards religion, the relation of the synagogue towards the congregations, the responsibility of Centers for Jewish education, and the function of the Centers in guiding and directing the impulse to social change, must be solved in the light of a clearly conceived and concretely formulated philosophy and program of Jewish life.

We are confident that conscientious application and efficient administration such as have characterized the Board's career for the past two decades will combine to yield those answers which will be of greatest value to Jewish life and consonant with the highest ideals of American democracy.

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## Jewish Chauvinism

DISTURBING news has recently come to us from Palestine. Nationalist Jewish students are reported to have beaten the famous anti-Nazi German refugee, Arnold Zweig, when he attempted to address a meeting at the Technicum in Haifa, not in the Hebrew language but in German. We do not know to what political party these students belong. Their excessive zeal for the claims of the national language, their disregard for the rights of others, their use of rowdyism as a means of promoting their ideological demands, are, however, all familiar to us. They are part of a phenomenon which draws its principal inspiration from Rome and Berlin and which, in its larger implications, must stand as the very antithesis of all that the Jew ought to represent in this modern world.

We are aware that the German Jewish refugees have often behaved provocatively toward the *yishub*. They retained their sense of superiority toward East-European Jews, and in some cases have even preferred German schools for their children to the Hebrew schools maintained by the Jewish community. There may have been some resentment at Mr. Zweig, particularly because of his novel, *De Vriendt Goes Home,* with its rather severe strictures against the leading national Jewish groups in Palestine.

Regardless of provocation, however, the attack against Mr. Zweig must stand condemned by an outraged Jewish public opinion throughout the world. We Jews have suffered sufficiently from fascist tyranny. We shall have suffered in vain unless that suffering shall have taught us to appreciate tolerance, democratic procedure, civil liberty. Incidents such as the Zweig attack will only tend to alienate the progressive elements of the world—and those of Jewry included—from the cause of Zionism. We can think of nothing more disastrous to the Jewish future in Palestine.

The students who participated in the Haifa incident were probably few in number, and certainly did not represent the sentiments of the *yishub*. But student movements, particularly when they are of an explosive nature, have proven contagious in the past. Jewish leaders must see to it that this development is nipped in the bud before it rises to more menacing proportions, and works irreparable harm to the Jewish people.

## The Jewish Exhibit at the 1939 Fair

THE suggestion that there be, at the New York International Exposition to be held in 1939, a Jewish exhibit, is an interesting and stimulating one. The execution of the suggestion, however, represents at once a peril and an opportunity. The peril lies in the possibility that those in charge of the Jewish section will portray Judaism inadequately. Thus, for example, they may turn the Jewish exhibition into a museum of ceremonial objects or confine it merely to the development of those religious ideas which are common to the religions of the western world. The peril is not a peril in the sense that such an exhibition will accentuate anti-Semitism or endanger the position of Jews. It is rather that we shall lose a classic opportunity to communicate understanding and appreciation of the whole of Jewish achievement in the past, and of the place of Jews in the present and future.

The Exposition will be visited by millions, many of whom have no acquaintance with Jewish life. It is unfair both to them and to Judaism to do what was done at the Chicago Fair—to turn the Jewish exhibit into a collection of curious ceremonial objects and, in the main, into a presentation of Biblical history. Those who are in charge of the Jewish section ought to proceed on the basis of presenting the Jewish civilization, and not alone the Jewish religion. There should, of course, be assigned to the synagogue and to the Jewish religion a central position. But then also there should be included a history and development of Jewish philanthropy, the theme of Jewish education, Hebrew and Yiddish literature in all their variegated fields, social ideas of Judaism, the contribution of the Jews to various areas of contemporary living. By all means should the rebuilding of Palestine be emphasized. The world should know that the Jewish civilization is entering upon a new stage in its development.

Neither the Jew nor the Gentile who visits the Jewish exhibition must leave with the impression that being a Jew is a matter simply of a monotheistic belief, of philanthropy and of strange oriental ritual objects. There are doubtless those who object to this larger presentation of Judaism, those Jews who feel the smaller one makes Judaism appear, the less likely it is that a hostile Gentile will notice it. We are not so naive as to imagine that anti-Semitism is either created or inhibited by expositions. But if the Exposition has any value as an educational instrument, we Jews ought to present ourselves in the full variety of our cultural life.

This issue once again raises the old problem of *"Who?"* It all depends on who is in charge of the preparations. Just as the value of Jewish philanthropy and communal organization has been impaired as a result of their having been administered by assimilationists and Jewish minimalists, so will the picture of ourselves be perverted, unless those who present it are in positive sympathy with a broad Judaism delineated in all of its varied manifestations.

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## Mr. Henry Ford: Anarchist

THE so-called sit-down or stay-in strikes that have gripped the country in recent weeks have dramatized and brought to the fore certain basic aspects of the ever-present struggle in the economic life of the nation. Henry Ford, for instance, recently declared that he would never recognize a union in his plants, that the workers are "foolish if they join a union," and that "they will lose their liberty" if they do. This was said when the Wagner Relations Act, insuring workers the right of collective bargaining, was the law of the land, and before the Supreme Court validated its constitutionality. In making the above declaration, Mr. Ford flouted a law passed by Congress, just as many employers had disregarded Section 7-a of the N.R.A. before the Supreme Court had declared the whole Act unconstitutional.

In doing so, Mr. Ford and the employers acted as anarchists.

It is one thing for employers to disregard the laws of the land when it suits *their purpose,* but no sooner do the workers resort to the sit-down strike to compel their employers to obey the law, than curiously enough, these same employers raise a cry about the "illegality" of these strikes. Employers may lock out workers; workers, however, may not lock out employers. And the reactionary press, sensing and fearing the effective weapon against exploitation which the sit-down strike constitutes, has been shedding the usual crocodile tears about the sit-down strike being a menace to "our" liberties, a challenge to the Constitution, un-American, etc., etc. The curious thing about it all is that employers need only obey the law of the land and enter into collective bargaining with their workers and insure them decent wages and hours, and the need for sit-down strikes would be obviated. And it is a known fact that all legitimate labor unions are prepared to enter into contracts providing that there shall be no sit-down or any other sort of strike during the life of the agreement.

When Mr. Ford and his kind become concerned over the "liberty" of their workers if they should join a union, we are indeed deeply touched. The "liberty" which unorganized workers have is the liberty to work for the benefit of employers (whenever they can get such work), and to slowly starve to death amidst the plenty which they themselves have produced. The only "freedom" left to individual employees is the freedom to quit work when their employers fail to consent to their demands for improved working conditions.

The history of the Labor movement teaches us that the struggle for shorter hours was once considered a crime; that the right to strike, i.e., to quit work collectively, was once a crime; picketing was once considered illegal; so was the Labor boycott. Now it is the sit-down or stay-in strike which industrialists are attempting to brand as "illegal"; and it is only now, curiously enough, when workers are joining up in industrial unions for their own protection and security, that bosses become solicitous over the "liberty" which their workers will "lose" if they join a union of their own choice.

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## Learn Hebrew!

IN THE most recent issue of the RECONSTRUCTIONIST, an editorial appeared dealing with the subject of Hebrew Week, and the difficult time the Hebraists in America are having to raise a very small amount of money with which to carry on their work. In this issue, by publishing three articles about Hebrew writers of abiding significance, we continue, in another form, our appeal to American Jews to acquaint themselves further with the literary renaissance of Jewish life.

Probably no feat of cultural power was ever accomplished by any people at any time which could equal the rebirth of the Hebrew language in our generation. Bialik, Tchernichowski and Agnon, to mention only three, are themselves monumental figures in Hebrew letters, and are the products of this latter day revival. What can we not hope for in the coming years?

The shame is all the greater, therefore, that American Jews are so little prepared to appreciate the works of such literary masters. From another point of view, how much American Jews miss by not being able to read these men in the original! So much of the intimate sense of what it means to be a Jew is lost when the Hebrew letters remain mere dots and dashes on paper, and never become stirring symbols of a living art.

We are not unaware of the many obstacles in the path of widespread Hebrew literacy. There is so little time left on the children's schedule; there is so little mental energy left with the adult after his day's struggle for existence. In gen-

eral, we Americans are poor linguists, having little or no opportunity or need for the utilization of foreign tongues. The fact remains, however, that Jewish life without Hebrew is unthinkable. If Jewish life is to have a future, every Jew will have to know at least *some* Hebrew, enough to dissolve that fearful barrier that stands between him and his Jewish heritage. With a knowledge of some Hebrew, even his appreciation of Jewish writings in translation will be infinitely enhanced.

A knowledge of Hebrew is both a cause and an effect of participation in Jewish life. One who is acquainted with Hebrew experiences that kinship with the Jewish people and Jewish civilization which resolves doubts of the worthwhileness of being Jewish, and renders completely irrelevant the question of the reality of the Jewish people. Thus, a knowledge of Hebrew leads to further knowledge of and participation in the life of the people.

Conversely, the knowledge of Hebrew is the effect of an interest in Judaism. The more one learns about the character of the inner life of the Jew, the more one is tempted to learn it at first hand. Thus, the knowledge of Hebrew is both a criterion and an incentive, and we strongly urge upon our readers a more earnest resolve to study the language and to encourage such study in children. We hope that the articles contained in this issue will in some measure inspire our readers to this end.

# Tchernichowski—Singer of Joy

*By* Robert Gordis

FROM the days of Mohammed to the present, Jews have gloried in the designation "The People of the Book." Yet it is a far cry from the universal devotion to learning and letters that characterized Jewish life in the past centuries to the widespread Jewish ignorance of our own day. This melancholy thought becomes especially poignant when one recalls that the sixtieth anniversary of Saul Tchernichowski has come and gone, scarcely stirring a ripple of interest among the masses of American Jews.

Tchernichowski is universally regarded as the greatest living Hebrew poet, and one of the foremost contemporary poets of all literatures. Nevertheless, there are untold numbers of cultivated Jews today, thoroughly at home in half-a-dozen cultures, who have never heard his name, let alone read his works. Yet his work is significant not only because of its undeniably first rank quality, but because of its implication for the entire course of Jewish culture in the future.

## I

Saul Tchernichowski was born in the Ukraine in 1875, the scion of a modern Jewish family of comfortable means. Unlike most Hebrew writers of his day, he never attended the old-fashioned Jewish schools, and never received the narrow but intensive traditional Jewish training of the *heder* and the *yeshivah*. He was given his Hebrew education by excellent private teachers of a modern type, while getting a broad, cultural training in the general schools. Later he studied at Heidelberg in Germany, and Lausanne in Switzerland, and then took up the practice of his profession in Petrograd, in Berlin, and most recently in Palestine.

The external uneventfulness of his life reflects the even tenor of a normal existence. From earliest youth, Tchernichowski was a handsome, healthy boy, drinking in the beauties of nature and the joys of life to the full. By this very token, he was a new type of Hebrew poet, who sang not of oppression and darkness, but

of sunlight and strength. He never felt the agonizing conflict between tradition and modern life, between the Jew and the human being, that both afflicted and inspired his contemporaries. The normal human quality of his reactions made him an abnormal? Hebrew poet. His first poem, written at the age of eighteen, struck a new note in Hebrew literature by its carefree and relaxed naturalness.

Since that day, Tchernichowski has remained *sui generis,* as his literary output has grown in quality and quantity. In honor of his sixtieth anniversary, an edition of all his works in ten volumes has been projected in Palestine. He has written many charming love lyrics, largely reflecting his own joyous experiences in youth. As one who is both a lover and a student of nature, he has a remarkably keen observation for the birds and the beasts, the flowers and the trees. Above all the natural elements, Tchernichowski is entranced with the sun, the source of life and healing, of light and joy for all the creatures of Mother Earth. Again and again he pours out his adoration to the sun, but the climax of his worship is reached in a magnificent series of fifteen sonnets called "To the Sun." Beyond his successful mastery of the intricate structure of the sonnet, he has demonstrated amazing, technical skill. The last line of each sonnet serves as the first line of the next, right through the series, and the fifteenth sonnet consists of the first lines of the fourteen preceding ones. What renders this dexterity all the more remarkable is the genuine lyrical quality of the verse.

Tchernichowski is also a master of the idyll, the loving and unhurried poetic narration of grand events, and here he has utilized the rich resources of Jewish traditional practices. He has depicted the beautiful sadness of the Sabbath afternoon as the lengthening shadows announce the approach of the work-a-day world, and the happy commotion of a Simhat Torah celebration in a crowded synagogue. Unlike most poets, he possesses a sly sense of humor which adds piquancy to his spirited description of a *Berit Milah* feast, and to his epical description of the manufacture of pancakes by a Jewish housewife.

The epic style reaches its height in Tchernichowski's awe-inspiring poem, "Baruch of Mainz," which is based on the persecutions of Jews in this German city during the Crusades, who are offered the alternatives of baptism or death. It is the story of a Jew who, in a moment of weakness, accepts the dominant faith, only to become crazed by a sense of the enormity of his cowardice. He thereupon kills his daughters, and sets fire to the monastery in which he is quartered. Written in 1902, this poem has proved to be not alone a chronicle of the past, but a tragic prophecy of the future. The spirit of this poem, however, is unusual for Tchernichowski. Most of his writing breathes a vigor that is free from bitterness, a joy that flows from a deep sense of peace.

Tchernichowski is scarcely less important as a translator than as an original poet. The scope and quality of his translations and the breadth of his appreciation of world literature are remarkable. He has gone back to the dawn of civilization in his splendid version of the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, brought to light in the excavations of the Euphrates Valley. He has brought the beauty of Hellas into the tents of Israel by his translations of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, and Sophocles' drama Oedipus Rex. Among his translations from English and American literature are Shakespeare's Macbeth, Longfellow's Hiawatha and Evangeline. His shorter translations of lyrics include poems by Burns, Shelley, Goethe, Richard Dehmel and Alfred de Musset. Recently the government of Finland awarded him a high honor for his masterly Hebrew version of the Finnish national epic Kalevala.

This prolific literary activity has gone hand in hand with a successful medical practice and many scientific interests. About three years ago, he published a He-

brew dictionary of anatomical terms, for use in teaching and research. He is an authority on botany and zoology, and is frequently consulted in these fields by the Hebrew Language Commission in Palestine. The incredible fecundity of his genius is emphasized by the fact that he has also written a goodly number of short stories, and is the author of a fascinating study of one of the most interesting Hebrew poets of the Middle Ages, Immanuel of Rome. Now in his sixties, Tchernichowski has retained the youth and vigor of his prime, and gives promise of many more years of creative achievement.

II

The significance of a poet always resides in his personality, in his unique reaction to the world in which he lives. It has always been noted that by virtue of environment and education, he differs radically from poets like Bialik, with whom he bears comparison in literary stature. Though Tchernichowski is deeply alive to the misery of his people in this tragic era, he does not sing of *Judenschmerz,* the pain of the Jew, but rather of *Menschenfreude,* man's joy in life, which persecution has all but crowded out of the heart of the Jew. He does not mourn and weep for his agonized brothers; when, as in "Baruch of Mainz," he thinks of their suffering, it is a passionate cry for revenge, rather than an abject plea for mercy that comes to his lips. By and large, however, he reacts to the world as a human being who is intoxicated with its beauty, in which he sees the universal sway of the Divine. Tchernichowski therefore feels a strong affinity for the Greeks, the worshipers of the beautiful, which finds exquisite expression in a matchless poem called "Before the Statue of Apollo." In this poem he recognizes the age-old conflict between the Jew and the Greek, but nevertheless voices his homage to the Sun-god, closing with an apostrophe to the strong and virile Deity worshiped by his ancestors in the primitive period of their desert wanderings.

Closely linked to Tchernichowski's joy in life in his broad universalism. He is a Jew, but nothing human is alien to him. It is noteworthy that Bialik has inherited the Jews' hatred of injustice, and their passionate love for their people. Tchernichowski has fallen heir to their deep concern with the lives and fates of all nations, as mirrored in their prophecies concerning Babylonia and Egypt, Ammon, Moab and Edom. Similarily, Tchernichowski is deeply interested in all humanity, whether it be the ancient civilizations of Babylonia and Greece, the primitive traditions of the Finns, the life of the American Indians, or the aspirations of modern men. By virtue of his translations alone, he has done much to dissipate the provincialism of modern Hebrew literature, and given to the growing Hebrew-speaking Jewry of Palestine and the diaspora a broad world-horizon. Tchernichowski has entered the stuffy, narrow confines of the Ghetto, made a breach in its walls, letting the sunshine stream in and the winds from the four corners of the earth.

Because of his joy in life and his broad universalism, some have denied that Tchernichowski is a Jew in spirit, calling him a pagan, a Greek, or a European. That is an error. It is true that Tchernichowski is unfamiliar to us, but that is because he is not typical of the Jew as he is today. He represents rather the Jew of our earliest past, characterized by vigor and hope, who deified the powers of nature, because he beheld that life was good. Tchernichowski glories in the days when Baal and Astarte were worshiped in Palestine, and the Jew felt that the light was sweet and that it was good for the eyes to behold the sun. If Tchernichowski seems unusual to us, it is because he is the symbol of his people under normal, healthful conditions, when each man lived under his vine and his fig-tree and none could make him afraid. He is a child of the creative epoch in Jewish life, long before exile and persecution had laid their heavy hand on the Jewish spirit. Hence

Tchernichowski possesses the rare gift of harmony, for the Jew and the man are not at war within him. He can love the world, without being in danger of losing his Jewishness. He is, in fine, a Hebrew child of nature, or, if you will, a Jewish citizen of the world.

Therein lies his greatest significance. For Tchernichowski is a herald of the ideal Jew of the future, a human being free from anxiety and neurosis, from self-contempt and self-conceit, who is genuinely at home in the world. Tchernichowski strengthens our faith that with the return of the wanderer from his long exile, there will come healing and vitality to the Jewish spirit as well. He is a living symbol of the Jewish life to which we aspire, when the scars of the *galut* will have healed and its tragedies be transcended, while its heroism and nobility will endure as an inspiring memory. Because he belongs more to the future than to us, he is bound to grow in stature with the passing years.

In an age of suffering and deep-seated hatred, we honor the matchless singer of serenity and joy, the poet of universal understanding. In honoring Saul Tchernichowski, the Jewish people salutes its future.

—o—

# "The Bridal Canopy"

*By* Hillel Bavli*

I

S. J. AGNON occupies a unique position in modern Hebrew literature. He is one of the few modern Hebrew writers to depict Jewish life of bygone ages with a glow of uncritical love, with grace and humor and with something like an epic fulness. His tales, couched in colorful style, brocaded with Biblical and Talmudic allusions, have a legendary character. Many of them are simple idylls written in rhythmic prose. Their author seems to be moving in a remote, enchanted world, which to him is very real, miraculously preserved and left intact to its minutest details. That world is within the Ghetto in Poland, as it existed more than a century ago, when Jewish life was self-sufficient and followed its natural course, untrammeled by influences from without. There is tranquillity and contentment and good cheer in that world, alongside poverty and adversity. It is a world illumined by the iridescent light of learning and kept warm by the exuberant spirit of genuine piety.

Unlike his great predecessor, and in many respects his master, Mendele Moher S'forim, who had a penetrating eye for the tragic side of Ghetto life and satirized with telling effect its abject misery, its woeful backwardness, Agnon takes particular delight in observing and describing the idyllic, harmonious side of that life, its spiritual cohesiveness and moral grandeur. To Agnon nothing is more moving than the sight of the community deeply rooted in Jewish traditions, guided by Jewish teachings and nourished by the perennial spring of folk-lore, hasidic and otherwise. His stories are noteworthy for the power they possess to invoke the spirit of the past, to reveal the social and cultural status of Jewish community life. They are much like old family pictures set in huge archaic frameworks from which look down smiling, patriarchal countenances. One should not look in these tales for the bold portrayal and incisive analysis of the individual with all his psychic conflicts and inner

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struggles. Rarely does Agnon plumb the treacherous depths of human emotions. His characters are simple, unobtrusive beings. They are for the most part submerged by the general current of life surrounding them and merely serve to accentuate the spirit of their environment.

Agnon approaches his task of story-telling with a spirit akin to that of one of his characters, the saintly Raphael, the Scribe (in the beautiful "Tale of the Scribe,") who dedicates his life in soulful devotion to the writing of the Scrolls of the Torah. Beneath the surface of Agnon's slow-moving and somewhat monotonous stories there is a deep, religious ecstasy—one of the primary forces of his creative personality. For Agnon is, essentially, the bard of Jewish tradition. Such stories as "The Six Orders (of the Talmud) of My Grandfather," "Two Pairs" (of *Tefillin*), "A Pretty Prayer From My Prayer-Book," suggest by their very names the sources of his inspiration. He is inspired by the vivid recollections of his personal experiences, and no less by the recollections, tales and legends of the Polish Jewish community as a whole. In the "Legends of Poland" he relates of Jewish martyrdom, of the bright light of learning, of messianic illusions, and of deep-seated love of Palestine. The love of Palestine finds its profoundest expression in the truly remarkable story, "In the Heart of the Seas." In it are described the dreamlike adventures of a group of Galician Jews on a trip to Erez Yisrael. It is a travel-description of the heart, a real monument of love to high idealism and all-conquering spirituality.

## II

"The Bridal Canopy,"** one of the major works of Agnon, is likewise a travel-description. It is the record of a journey made through Galician Jewish communities sometime during the early part of the 19th century by two amiable individuals, Reb Yudel Hassid, a God-fearing Jew in search of dowries and bridegrooms for his three virtuous daughters, and his boon companion, Nuta the Waggoner. Slowly and leisurely, these two wind their way through numerous towns and villages, stopping at the synagogues and houses of study, visiting various homes, listening to divers stories, until, with the help of the Almighty, Reb Yudel realizes his ambition, and the dowries and the bridegrooms are procured.

A very simple plot indeed. The work, however, becomes more intricate and gains in color and importance by the many side-stories, discussions and ballads that are interwoven into the pattern of the main story. The book is a veritable mine of folklore, bright with hues of Jewish learning, a real treasure of Jewish customs and ceremonies, manners of speech and thought, beliefs and superstitions. The humorous and the grotesque (such as "The Story of the Pot," the story of "Lasunka") go side by side with the involved homily "as to whether a bride may be gazed at to endear her to her husband," the sermons and moralities on humility and the nothingness of life are followed by anecdotes and vernacular *bon mots,* the saintly contemplations of Reb Yudel are commingled with the mockeries of the marriage-jester and the gay frivolities of the minstrels of Brod.

In reading this book carefully one gets an intimate picture of Jewish life in its various manifestations, the spiritual as well as the physical, the serious as well as the gay. It is a book teeming with humanity, with persons representing various stations and classes of Jewish society. There is the farmer and the innkeeper, the merchant and the worker, the cantor and the matchmaker, the worthy of the town and the intellectual, the learned rabbi and the itinerant preacher. Each one makes his appearance in story or in song. None of them, however, rises to any height of character personification. All of them, in their totality, add color and

**"The Bridal Canopy" by S. J. Agnon; translated into English by I. M. Lask. Doubleday Doran and Co., Garden City, N. Y. 1937.

effect to the kaleidoscopic view of Jewish life.

The spirit of supreme faith, of love for the Torah and its votaries, is the one great force that unifies the discordant elements of the book. This spirit finds its strongest expression in the saintly character of Reb Yudel, whose outlook on life may be epitomized in the old rabbinic phrases which he characteristically restates: "The Torah is a sketch map of the world, and the world goes its way in accordance with the rules by which the Torah is expounded."

III

The significance of Agnon lies not merely in his power to reveal the spirit of a remote past, but even more so in the particular art of story-telling which he cultivates. As a matter of fact one depends upon the other. It is through the medium of his quaint art in which folk-tale and anecdote, rabbinic homily and parable, are strung together and fused into one narrative that the characteristics of the distant past are brought to life.

Though cast in the famous mold of Don Quixote, "The Bridal Canopy" has little to connect it with the masterpiece of Cervantes. It lacks the sustained pathos, the dramatic quality, and the high suggestiveness of the latter work. Its forte is the humorous rambling narrative whereby the commonplace and the naive are raised to the plane of historic significance.

In portraying the idyllic side of ancient Jewish life, Agnon reverts to antique forms employed by the Hebrew troubadours and short story writers of medieval days, such as Zabara, for instance, in "His Book of Delight." It is to the credit of Agnon that he perfected an ancient form, lending force and epic stability to the loose and fragmentary folk-tale.

The style of Agnon is as unique as the world he portrays. It is constituted of elements diverse in their linguistic lineage, all of which are interwoven and interlaced like many-colored tapestries. It is ornate and yet does not lack the simplicity of directness; it abounds in Biblical and Midrashic quotations and at the same time retains the raciness and pungency of the vernacular.

"The Bridal Canopy" is one of those works that hardly lend themselves to translation. Its cultured dialect is such that to shed its garb is to mar much of its beauty. Its many allusions and occasional play on words would lose their flavor in a language other than Hebrew. It was therefore an act of courage to have undertaken the task of translating such a work into English. Of these difficulties the translator was well aware. "It was obviously useless," he says in his foreword, "in translating 'The Bridal Canopy,' to try and reproduce that mosaic effect of Mr. Agnon's prose, which is so great a part of its charm for the Hebrew reader." And indeed, one wonders how an English reader could get any humor out of a story like "The Cock and the Mouse," for instance, not knowing that it depends much on a play on words. Incidentally, a glossary might have been helpful to the uninitiated.

Withal, allowing for the shortcomings inherent in a translation of this kind and for occasional slips in the Hebrew idiom, the translation of Mr. Lask is a creditable piece of work. It follows closely the original and effects a style that is midway between 17th century literary English and recent vernacular. It retains a good deal of the dignity and charm of the original and, above all, it reads well. Surely, an important Hebrew work has been made accessible to the English-reading public.

# "The Oral Bialik"

*By* Reuben Wallenrod*

PUBLIC addresses and speeches are not the most suitable medium for the expression of a poet. The contents of public addresses as well as their form are bound to vary in accordance with the occasion and audience. Lofty thoughts must at times be brought down to earth, and hackneyed truisms must be repeated again and again. The reader approaches, therefore, with some uneasiness and misgivings the two volumes of "The Oral Bialik,"** which contain his formal and informal speeches, addresses and interviews over a period of more than twenty years.

The publisher's statement in the foreword, that most of the material had never been revised or edited by Bialik himself, fills the reader with apprehension. Bialik's poetic aura might dissolve in the hard light of prosaic discussion. But the fear is soon dispelled. Problems abstract and theoretical become distinct, colorful, and concretized into realities that call for immediate action. The variety of topics and subjects in all their teeming complexity are, in turn, fused together into an organic wholeness which makes one oblivious to the frequent repetitions and even occasional contradictions. The various problems he discusses, the Hebrew language, the Hebrew culture and Erez Yisrael, matter and spirit, language and culture, and to use Bialik's classification, "Halakah and Agadah," "Bread and Vision," are but various revelations of the creative life of the Jewish people.

## II

The Hebrew language is to Bialik the very basis of Jewish cultural life. Some of the best speeches and lectures concern themselves with the Hebrew language, and in most of the other lectures he succeeds in interjecting the problem of the language.

All Jewish cultural values which have found expression in languages other than Hebrew have been lost to the Jewish people and have not left any considerable impression on the development of Jewish culture. The very bearers of Jewish culture in other languages were at times lost to us. Bialik supports his thesis with convincing examples of the Jewish-Aramean, Jewish-Alexandrine and Jewish-Arab cultures, and of the work of modern writers and poets that have been lost to us, though their subject matter was at times strictly Jewish. On the other hand, works written in Hebrew, though their contents were not specifically Jewish, have become an inherent part of Jewish culture:

"The difference between 'The Song of Songs,' 'Ecclesiastes' and works of other peoples is hardly perceptible. It is mainly their form that is Hebrew, and therefore they are ours."

"To know Judaism through the medium of another language is like kissing one's own mother through a 'kerchief."

And with poetic enthusiasm and fervor he goes even further:

"If I ask you to point out to me one real perceptible national value, you will find it to be the Hebrew language. Contents may change, but the language does not change; it only develops."

The other most important part of "The Oral Bialik" is devoted to the Jewish cultural values proper and their development through the ages. This includes the lectures in which Bialik expounds his cherished idea of *Kinus* (or the need of conserving and organizing the literary treasures of its Jewish past), the three lectures on Halakah and Agadah and the lectures on the Talmud, on literature, the theatre, the Hebrew University, etc. The most important and original are the former in which he traces the various stages of the

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Hebrew culture of the past, and, by the very way of presenting the material, a broad and vigorous course of future growth is mapped out. The reader is impressed by the thoroughness and depth of Bialik's knowledge of the sources, and is swept away emotionally by the strength of the poet's expression. As in his poetry, handfuls of precious pearls are scattered, and the reader is dazzled. Scientific material usually dry and dusty passes as a refreshing stream. The atmosphere of days gone is revived. Forgotten men, creators of the Agadah and the Halakah, are seen at their work, and underlying philosophical or sociological motives, which might have activated the supposedly simple sayings of the Agadah and the curt sententiousness of the Halakah, don new significance and value. The gaps of culture are bridged. The scientific *Kinus* becomes important, necessary, timely. It becomes one with the modern theatre, literature, university.

And as expected, the third component of Bialik's unity is Mother Earth. The development of Hebrew language and culture is possible only in Erez Yisrael. All that Hebrew language and culture could do in other lands is to defend themselves, to hold their own in arrested growth. Bialik finds even an advantage in the fact that the Hebrew language remained for centuries a language only of the book. Had the Hebrew language been during all these centuries of dispersion a language of daily use, it might have been divided and broken up into "Hebrew languages," kinds of various patois in different countries. Genuine creation and growth need the earth and its sources.

## III

Earth, culture, language are thus the inseparable links of Bialik's unity, and out of these branch all the arts and sciences and daily occupations of which Bialik speaks in his various discourses. Here too he extends his conception of Halakah and Agadah: "Agriculture is Halakah, a Jewish village is Halakah, sound business is Halakah, etc." All the petty hair-splitting about the primacy of spiritual or material revival, Judaism or Humanism, individual or society look pitiful under Bialik's powerful touch. The creative man is the measure of all things. Bread and vision, earth and heaven were never separated in Bialik's thought and poetry. Bialik's thought never roamed in empty spaces or became entangled in mystical clouds. Bialik always had his feet firmly planted on the earth and felt it with all his senses.

When he expressed his disgust at man's work on earth, it was strong and indignant not because of estrangement from the earth, but because of his very love for a full and rich life on it. Thus when Bialik speaks of art he points out that "the poetry of Israel has always been a poetry of struggle;" science too must be "not just a sport . . . it should strive to build the country, to aggrandize and to beautify life." His words about the theatre bring forth the idea even more poignantly. The theatre, according to Bialik, is the form of art which sets up the strongest link between reality and vision and makes language the most active force for the re-creation of life and its sublimation. It brings the vision of the poet into daily life and it raises everyday toil from its lifeless weariness.

Bialik's realism, however, is by no means limited to immediate use and passing values. In his pleas for the Hebrew University, in his continuous fight against the impoverishment of the Hebrew language and culture, his realism is deep and reaches far beyond the present. He felt that the after-war generation in its desire for quick adjustment endangered the inheritance of the past. The young settler of Palestine, in his dislike of the sheer spirituality of the past, went to the other extreme of a new pale and emaciated language and cuture. Bialik showed the way by word and deed toward enriching without stagnancy, toward development without leaving the nourishing sources.

Bialik's standard of measurement and

foundation of expression is the *pasuk*. To Bialik the *pasuk* does not merely mean the flowery language of the past, that was used and overused without discrimination by his forerunners. "The Biblical style with its stereotyped phraseology," says Bialik, "tastes like lukewarm water, the temperature of the water and that of the mouth are alike, and the drinker lacks the sensation of water coming into his mouth." The *pasuk* of Bialik is a *pasuk* re-created, a *pasuk* refreshed through subjective experience and regenerated in new conditions of life. This kind of *pasuk* unites the past with the present:

"Every living language has a written Torah and an oral Torah. Every language is based on *pesukim*. Woe to the language that has no *pesukim*. . . . Chekhoff used *pesukim* in his writings. Goethe and Schiller used *pesukim*. At the base of the language of writers and poets stands the language of their ancestors and hidden invisible *pesukim*. . . . Not *pesukim* as they are. . . . If they are not renewed and not regenerated, they die, they become duds." And Bialik shows by example the potential strength of the old *pasuk*. His discourses bristle with old sayings and with old turns of speech, but they become all fresh and full of vitality, renewed strength and timely significance, like springs coming from old mountains.

The construction of the discourses is very often loose. It occurs, however, to the reader that the very looseness conveys the thought better. It is as if one sees Bialik behind his sentences, Bialik stopping in the middle of his conversation, thinking a while, repeating, emphasizing, joking, entreating, exhorting. . . . One sees Bialik, the man, carried away by the association of his own thoughts and words, at times coming swiftly, light and flashing, and at others coming heavily laden and slow moving.

Popular notion has it that Bialik was very soft spoken, and was always saying nice things about everyone. The present collection belies this opinion completely. Bialik is frank with everybody. He chastises the "General Zionists" at their own meeting for not doing anything for the present needs of the country, and he scolds the "Workers' Organization" for not paying enough attention to the nation's past. He dislikes heartily the "Revisionists" and tells them so. He reproves the readers for their indifference to the Hebrew literature and rebukes the writers for their everlasting complaints and for speaking about art instead of producing works of art.

## IV

"The Oral Bialik" furnishes a better understanding of the written Bialik.

In the lecture on his own poem, *Megilat Haesh* (The Fiery Scroll) we follow Bialik in his process of creation. This particular lecture seems to have been reported stenographically. (The editors fail to state how the lectures and speeches were recorded). The merits and shortcomings of the rest of the collection seem to mark this lecture: repetitions and deviations, sudden flashes of thought and hesitation and groping after expression, ripe, full ideas and unfinished suggestiveness. The reader is following Bialik in his creative struggles, beginning with the epical conception of the "Megilah," passing to the transition of the lyrical creation and to the intensity of the very height of its lyrical power. It is a journey with Bialik into the ways of his poetic expression, it is delving into the subconscious realms of the poet.

And, referring to the legend that God showed to Moses fiery images of the *Mishkan, Menorah and Shekel,* Bialik reveals to us the source of his creation:

"A fiery form is kindled in the mind . . . a light flashes for a moment, and then the artist tries to grasp that fire and to give shape to it. . . . The glimmer appears for one moment . . . and then all his endeavor and strife are merely an attempt to grasp the vanished light. . . ."

These intuitive moments activate Bialik in his creation. It is the vanished something he is always searching for and pursuing in his poetry. It is the "hidden spark" "which he struck from his own

rock;" it is "the lost chant" for which he is looking without avail; it is "the little hidden window in the little attic;" "the only prayer which God has not accepted" —and finally, the vision of his childhood which he cannot forget. It is the fiery image that made Bialik the uncompromising prophet of his people and their articulate voice demanding a full, rich and free life.

# Realities of Jewish Life

### Christians Strike to Get Jobs for Jews

Warsaw (WNS)—An unusual example of labor solidarity between Jewish and Christian workers in a Jewish-owned glass factory in Opotosczo is reported by the Folks-zeitung, Bundist organ.

When the factory owner discharged 50 Jewish workers, his 250 Christian workers went on strike.

The strike continued for several weeks and was not called off until the employer took back the dismissed Jewish workers.

* * *

### Report Hebrew Planned For Arab School

Jerusalem (WNS-Palcor) — Al Liwa, Arabic daily, reported that the Palestinian Government is planning the introduction of Hebrew as a subject in Arab schools. It is also reported here that beginning on April 1st, the Palestine Government plans the institution of stringent control of traffic from Transjordan into Palestine. The institution of this system was one of the demands made by the Jewish Agency during the recent hearings of the Royal Commission.

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### 400,000 Jews Left Poland Since War

Warsaw (JTA)—About 400,000 Jews have emigrated from Poland since the World War, it was announced at a conference of the Jewish Emigration Aid Society.

The figure represents half of the entire Polish emigration during that period, it was stated.

Immigration curbs in virtually all countries of the world have cut the yearly average of Jewish emigrants from Poland to 20,000 from 50,000 before the war, the report stated.

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### Dan Cupid Aids Palestine Treasury $100,000 Worth

Jerusalem (JTA)—The government is making a pretty penny from girls who come to the Holy Land as visitors, fall in love with Palestinians and decide to marry and settle here.

The treasury has gained $100,000, newspapers reported, by confiscating the $300 tourist deposit of visitors who remain here. Most of them are girls who acquired Palestinian citizenship by marrying citizens.

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### Half of Hebrew U. Students Working Way Through College

Jerusalem (JTA)—"Working my way through college" is a major industry on Mount Scopus, where more than half of the 675 Hebrew University students last year had outside jobs to support themselves while studying.

The precarious economic conditions interfere with students' work at the university, a recent survey showed. Only 43 per cent of last year's students had sufficient funds to support themselves without seeking outside sources of income. The majority had various kinds of jobs. About 23 per cent worked as day laborers. Another 33 per cent of them made money as tutors. Nine per cent of the working students even served as housemaids.

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### Socialized Medicine in Palestine

The *Kupat Holim* of the Histadrut serves 103,000 members who are eligible for medical aid, at 115 branches. Eighty full-time and 91 part-time physicians are in charge.